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AUTHOR Bohrer, Stephen
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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes a study examining the current conditions and unique nature of rural schools in Kansas. The purpose of the study was to identify problems that could be addressed through educational policy and state legislation. A literature review reports on the distinctive nature of rural life, factors leading up to school consolidation, the effectiveness of small schools, the strong relationship between rural economic development and school success, the problems associated with recruiting and retaining rural teachers, and the best teaching methods and latest technology for delivering quality instruction. The study also compared the populations of small towns in Kansas that retained or closed their high schools during district consolidations of the 1960s; reviewed demographic studies projecting the number of students living in rural Kansas in the 21st century; and interviewed 21 key educators, policymakers, and rural education and development specialists. Recommended policies include: (1) creating a statewide technology plan that provides designs, advice, and loans or grants for districts to purchase and maintain interactive television transmissions and computer networks; (2) equalizing capital outlay purchases based on a district's ability to pay; (3) creating a Kansas Office of Rural Education to assist rural districts in promoting the heritage, culture, and distinctiveness of rural life; and (4) increasing school participation in rural development initiatives. Contains 30 references. (LP)

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Meeting the Educational Needs of Rural Kansas Students: Research
Synthesis and Policy Recommendations

Stephen Bohrer, Ph.D.
Superintendent
Central, USD #462
P.O. Box 128
Burden, Kansas 67019
(316) 438-2218

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Stephen Bohrer

Chapter 1 Introduction

Almost daily, the Wichita Eagle carries an editorial denouncing what it sees as excesses, entrenchment, or deficiencies of Kansas education. Professional education journals publish entire issues on school reform and have been doing so for more than a decade. The public generally lacks confidence in schools' ability to meet the needs of the nation's students, and business leaders regularly attack the quality of the schools' graduates. While isolated at least until recently from the extremes of these problems, rural students do face them and others. They may simultaneously face the double-barreled shortcomings of limited economic and educational opportunities.

Lewis (1992) accepted that rural schools are generally considered to be schools that serve communities of fewer than 2,500 residents. Data compiled for school year 1989-1990 showed that Kansas had 52.4 percent of its students living in rural areas, small towns served 16.8 percent of school students and 30.8 percent of students were served by districts in urban/suburban communities. The proportion of rural students was higher in Kansas than any other state (Stern, 1992).

Rural economic survival and rural education seem immutably linked. The survival of the rural experience, plus the education of the students who live there, rests in being able to provide basic social services and employment opportunities at an efficient rate of taxation, delivered in established as well as yet untried means.

The purpose of this study is to define the current condition and unique nature of rural schools so that services and solutions can be identified that problems can be addressed effectively. It is intended that policy statements can be developed from the study's conclusions that may justify legislative consideration.

Chapter 2 Review of Literature

This chapter describes the hearty individualism and tenacity of the pioneers who settled Kansas in the late 1860s (Miner, 1986). Carroll (1990), Nachtigal (1982a), and Sher (1977) describe the distinctive nature of rural life as being uniquely distinguishable from urban life, saying that it is slower paced; less pressured; possesses a greater spirit of cooperation among students and staff; offers more opportunities for student leadership and participation in activities; and has more formal interaction among students, staff, and parents.

The school district consolidation process in Kansas in the 1960s, was described in some detail. Accompanying this section was the more general explanation of business and industry's influence on education as described by Callahan (1962). Demographic studies (Floerchinger, 1992) showing

migration history and future estimates showed how the loss of students in rural settings exacerbates the problem of providing an adequate education to rural students.

Discussion about a declining student population base and the size of districts led naturally to a discussion about the educational effectiveness of small schools. Barker and Gump (1964) began the dialogue with others describing research conducted in the early part of this decade. Webb (1989) asked the question in 1991 in a journal devoted exclusively to the subject (Cienkus & Berlin, 1989). While rural schools and life in rural areas have difficulties, the preponderance of current research shows better achievement for students from small schools than large ones, even when factors such as pupil teacher ratio, socioeconomic level and race are factored in (Barker & Gump, 1964; Berlin & Cienkus, 1989; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Hare, 1990; Horn, 1991; Howley, 1994; Jewell, 1989; Lutz, 1990; Muse, Smith, & Barker, 1987; Nachtigal, 1992; Webb, 1989). As identified by these studies and by school climate studies of Edmonds and Frederiken (1978), smaller school size apparently helps schools be successful.

Chubb and Moe (1990) contend that this correlation is achieved through a reduction in bureaucracy, while others (Nachtigal, 1982; Sher, 1977) would credit the achievement to the unique nature of rural schools and the life-view held by the students, their parents, the staff, and the students' community.

The chapter reveals how keeping families in small towns and rural settings is contingent on stable job opportunities. Students who graduate,

have to leave, if jobs are not locally available. Rural economic development is tied closely to the success of schools and stability of their student population (Bryant & Grady, 1990; Haughey & Murphy, 1983). Darling (1993) talked about a town's economic survivability in terms of its economic base.

The distinctive nature of rural life makes attracting and retaining teachers difficult. Teachers should, therefore, be formally prepared in college to teach in the rural setting (Amodeo, Martin, & Reece, 1983; Barker, 1986; Theobald, 1988).

The study then reports how schools should embrace the best of teaching methods and delivery mechanisms (Glasser, 1986; Glasser, 1989) in order to hold the attention of students and maximize their achievement. Several pages are devoted to describing the latest technologies that can enhance teachers' ability to deliver quality instruction that is relevant to the students.

Several new school management schemes are discussed including: flexible scheduling (McGuire, 1989), increasing family service providers access to schools (Hodgkinson, 1989), and districts sharing a superintendent (Decker & Talbot, 1989).

Chapter 3 Methodology

In addition to the literature review, three pieces of research were used to help answer the three research questions: (1) a comparison of populations of small towns that retained or closed their high schools in the

district consolidations of the 1960s was conducted to determine the correlation between the town's population and whether or not it closed its high school, (2) a review of several demographic studies to determine the availability of students in rural areas of Kansas into the first quarter of the next century, while (3) the most extensive part of the study was interviews of 21 key educators, policy makers, and rural education and development specialists.

The interviews were conducted and recorded by the researcher and consisted of the following five questions:

Interview Question 1:

Describe several key events in the recent history of rural education.

Interview Question 2:

In your opinion what is the current condition of rural schools?

Interview Question 3:

What are some examples of reform movements, legislative efforts, and/or other factors that you believe have promise to positively affect rural schools?

Interview Question 4:

What would you recommend occur in rural education that may lack the political or philosophical leverage to be implemented?

Interview Question 5:

What will you predict about the future of rural schools in the year 2000 and beyond?

Summary and conclusions were written to express both the

quantified data and the general tone of responses observed by the analyst.

Chapter 4 Results

Numbers in parenthesis represent the citation's line number from the transcribed interview.

Research Question #1: What is the current condition of and what are the main problems facing rural education?

Chance sees the value of rural schools impacting students when he said, "one thing I think rural schools will always have going for them is the way they impact the affected domain of kids" (5947-5949). Hodges (85-94) has a positive current view of rural schools, due to colleges taking more interest in rural issues, the advent of fiber optics and other technologies that give rural schools equal access to information, and legislatures in many states equalizing school finances. Dennis concurs that rural schools are in "good, good" condition because of QPA, the new school finance formula, two-way interactive video, and service centers (366-393).

Some studies paint a bleak picture of rural schools (Stern, 1994). Some interviewees have the same negative perception, for instance, Nigus and Marshall think they are being squeezed to the point financially that they it is affecting the quality of education offered (Nigus, 656-658; Marshall, 917). Niles is concerned by the shrinking population base (1816). Havlicek is concerned about attracting and retaining quality teachers (2426-2428) and the loss of educational continuity this presents. Barker brought out the aging infrastructure that rural districts face along with declining evaluation

to pay for new buildings (2894-2897).

Little made a significant point when he said, "we're focusing on the efficiency issue, but not spending enough time on the effectiveness issue" (3526-3528). Baskerville emphasizes the psychological impact of rural schools on their students by stating that kids can "feel positive and good about themselves, because they've been developed as a total person" (4455-4458). He thinks schools could help their students even more by teaching "that it was not a failure or a disgrace or a shame to return home" to work (4473).

Effect of school district consolidation on small Kansas towns

U. S. Census Bureau data provided the populations for the affected KS communities for years 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980 and 1990. For each community that lost its high school, a comparison town was selected. This data was placed in a spread sheet program and graphed. The 101 towns that closed their high schools experienced a decline in population of 26.2 percent during the fifty years from 1940 to 1990. The 39 communities that retained their high schools (of similar size and from the same counties as those that lost their schools), experienced an 18.6 percent increase in population in that same time frame. While these changes in population are impressive, no evidence suggested that the loss of the school resulted in any appreciable additional loss to the towns' populations. The greatest decline in population actually occurred prior to consolidation.

Research Question #2: What is being used or suggested for the improvement of rural schools?

Hodges said that the most important improvement to rural schools this decade was state and national legislation and emphasis on improved curriculum, involving higher standards, and accurate measurement of progressive improvement in student achievement (123-128). Krider sees the need for technology emphasis so important he suggested that the state fund a tech-prep program for every school. (1555-1557). Dennis said that these new standards would be met through staff inservice training and inner-local cooperation (422-429).

Baskerville thinks rural schools should conscientiously teach students a "rural curriculum" (4514). This could involve county and community history, outreach to the living pioneers in the small towns, and showing how now through technology and a willingness and ability to drive that jobs, culture, and opportunity for successful living are available in rural settings (4532-4538). Nachtigal said, "schools ought to be about the business of community development in its broadest sense" (5102-5103).

Research Question #3: What changes in the number of students is likely to occur?

The total population of the state will increase by about 10 percent between now and 2030 to 2,781,613 (Floerchinger, 1992). This growth is almost exclusively in the most populous counties and largest cities. Rural counties will lose a large percentage of population in order to "furnish" the people who will move to more urban areas. Another study (Williams,

1993) showed, in fact, that 77 counties (of 105 total) will end this century with fewer inhabitants than they had in 1900.

Interview question #5 (prediction of the future) also contributes part of an answer to this research question. An encouraging comment by Barker (3068) spoke about the need for school districts to identify "local heroes" and said how influential they could be in identifying the steps to take and in motivating others.

Chapter 5 Policy Recommendations

As in any dynamic institution, reforms are needed in education and are underway throughout the nation. Causing change in rural schools is exacerbated by declining enrollment and languishing financial support, yet is eased by reduced bureaucracy. Taken as a whole the review of literature and the interviews lead this researcher to call for the following policies to be studied at the state level.

1. The first suggested policy is to create a state wide technology plan that comprehensively designs, advises districts, and provides implementation loans or grants to districts to purchase, install, and maintain interactive television transmissions as well as MAC, DOS, and dual platform computer networks. The following sub-points amplify this policy suggestion: (1) this program will assure districts do not spend money on unnecessary replication researching appropriate hardware, (2) technology will be compatible between buildings and districts, and (3) the state would take bids on mass purchases.

2. A second recommended policy is for the state to equalize capital outlay purchases based on a district's ability to pay. Local Option Budgets (LOB) and new construction bonds are presently equalized to assure that all districts have approximately the same ability to offer equal opportunities.

3. The third policy recommendation is to request the Kansas State Board of Education to create an Office of Rural Education to assist rural districts promote the heritage, culture, and distinctives of rural life and to replace the bureaucratic one-size-fits-all approach from the state board. As Chance said (6117-6124), "rural schools are a wonderful laboratory testing ground . . . Free them (rural schools) from rules and regulations . . . so they can be creative with what their needs are for their community.

4. The final recommended policy is to increase school participation in rural development initiatives managed by non-educational agencies. This would synergise the expertise of the local school's work force with the dynamic offerings of other agencies. An office of rural education could coordinate the common interests of rural development and rural education that would benefit students while enhancing the economic base of rural communities.

For more information, contact:
Stephen Bohrer, Superintendent
Central, USD #462
P.O. Box 128
Burden, Kansas 67019
(316) 438-2218

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